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Wiretap Target May Head ACLU

The American Civil Liberties Union's search for a new director for its national office in Washington may be all over but the shouting. Former aide to Henry Kissinger Morton Halperin, now the director of the Center for National Security Studies, is thought by many to be the top contender to fill the post left vacant by John Shattuck, who left to become a vice president of Harvard on July 1.

A 10-member search committee, which includes Roger Wilkins of the Institute for Policy Studies and Arnoldo Torres of the League of United Latin American Citizens, will meet later this month to begin sifting through the applications for the position, with a decision expected by the end of September. But Halperin is said by some ACLU staffers to have an inside track on the job.

Halperin himself describes his chances with the sort of caginess one might expect from a man with years of experience at the Pentagon and the National Security Council.

"I haven't even applied for the position," says Halperin. "The search committee is conducting an affirmative-action search now."

Was he ruling himself out?

"Well, I didn't say that," he replied.

In years past, the ACLU has has generally gone outside its ranks to fill the top spot. As a candidate, Halperin is both fish and fowl: His own organization is partially funded by the ACLU. Halperin is said to have been interested in the ACLU post for several years. He was passed over for the position in the late '70s when John Shattuck replaced Chuck Morgan as head of the Washington office. Halperin has close ties with the ACLU hierarchy in New York through Ira Glasser, the ACLU's executive director. Using the search committee's findings as a guide, Glasser will make the final decision on who will get the top job in Washington.

If Halperin prevails, the Center for National Security Studies will likely be absorbed by the ACLU, which according to one staff member would be "just a matter of changing some job titles." That would signal a shift from years past, when the center was more at home with grassroots activism rather than with the ACLU's more traditional lobbying methods.

Halperin is considered to be particularly adept at working with decision-makers while still

maintaining a healthy distance from them. In the late '60s, he helped Kissinger rebuild the National Security Council, only to discover later that his boss had authorized the FBI to tap his phone in search of leakers. After he left the government, Halperin sued Kissinger and was represented by the ACLU's Shattuck.

An ability to cooperate with power-brokers without being co-opted by them is a talent much sought after at the ACLU following the departure of the popular Shattuck. But there is disagreement between the national office and some local affiliates over whether the ACLU should be making any accommodations with the government at all. The national office's recent compromise on a pending House bill that would allow the CIA to place more of its files beyond the reach of the Freedom of Information Act met with particularly strong disapproval from the southern California branch, among others. Halperin himself helped work out sections of the compromise bill, and his appointment to the top slot in Washington could signal an attempt to bring into line the ACLU's more militant membership.

—Tom McNichol